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"Try Hard': Attitudes to advertising in Online Social Networks

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“Try Hard”: Attitudes to Advertising in Online Social Networks

Abstract

Advertising has recently entered many new spaces it does not fully understand. The rules that apply in traditional media do not always translate in new media environments. However, their low cost of entry and the availability of hard-to-reach target markets, such as Generation Y, make environments such as online social networking sites attractive to marketers. This paper accumulates teenage perspectives from two qualitative studies to identify attitudes towards advertising in online social network sites and develop implications for marketers seeking to advertising on social network sites.

Introduction

Unprecedented developments in digital technology have resulted in advertising entering new spaces where the rules of traditional media do not always apply. However, the low cost of entry into these spaces and their attractiveness to hard-to-reach target markets like Generation Y make channels such as online social networking sites desirable to marketers. Media planners recognise that new media, such as online social networking sites, provide opportunities to communicate directly with the consumer in their personal environment (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Further, these new environments support many of the recent changes in consumer media consumption, including a shift from a push to a pull information strategy (Schultz, 2006).

Online social networking sites are user-generated content sites that provide platforms for information sharing, photo sharing and the blogging of ideas and/or personal details (Gangadharbatia, 2008). These online social networking sites are funded by the selling of advertising specifically targeted to the individual, as well as the selling of statistical data collected from the profiles of the site users (Barnes, 2006). In March 2009, Facebook became the world's most popular communication tool, overtaking email (Nielsen Global Faces and Network Places, cited in James, 2009).

The overwhelming growth of online social networking sites has changed the purpose and functionality of the internet (Vogt and Knapman, 2008) and the way that advertisers view advertising on the internet. With advertising expenditure in this new media expected to reach \$2 billion by 2011 (Gangadharbatia, 2008), it is important that advertising practitioners understand the characteristics of online social networking sites as a medium for advertising and how this advertising might differ from standard internet advertising. This paper, therefore, examines teenage attitudes towards advertising in online social networking sites in order to assist marketers seeking to advertising on social networking sites.

Literature Review

Internet advertising has been extensively researched (Grant, 2005; Ko, Cho and Roberts, 2005; La Ferle, Edwards and Lee, 2000; Namiranian, 2006; Rappaport, 2007). However,

there is limited academic research about online social networking sites as an advertising medium (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). These user-generated content sites such as Facebook, Myspace and (more recently) Twitter provide opportunities for self-expression, sharing and connection, and that content combines to become global communities (Knapman and Vogt, 2007; Gangadharbatia, 2008). These sites provide advertisers with an opportunity to target consumers using personalised content based on their behaviours and preferences, as well as establishing a two-way dialogue (James, 2009). Despite the faith and advertising dollars invested in these sites (Gangadharbatia, 2008), many marketers are not convinced of this medium's effectiveness and feel that there is too much risk involved in advertising in this semi-controlled environment (James, 2009).

Yoon and Kim (2001) suggest that internet advertising differs from more traditional advertising media because it provides unlimited delivery of information from unlimited sources of information and has the added benefit of targeting specific groups or individuals. White (2005) further suggests that the internet as an advertising medium is characterised as an interactive medium that is highly measureable and supportive of other advertising mediums (i.e. synergistic). We also characterise internet advertising as having high levels of targetability and flexibility. Further, its multimedia capacity allows the advertising message to be enhanced.

Grant (2005), in his study of young people and their relationship with the internet, identifies five motivations behind their use of the internet. These motivations include (1) mood enhancement, (2) to learn by experience, (3) passive escapism, (4) information and advice seeking, and (5) social interaction. His studies found that mood enhancement (e.g. being entertained or being given a 'lift' in mood) was a very powerful motivator of internet use. The second most powerful motivator was experiential learning, where internet users are learning and exploring the internet and are able to exchange ideas and discuss findings with others via email, bulletin boards and social networking sites. Notably, the least powerful motivator of internet use was searching for information and advice, which suggests that internet users may not be receptive to advertising information.

While research into internet advertising has increased, little work has been done to separate and define unique aspects of the internet, such as online social networking sites, as an advertising medium. This study examines teenage attitudes towards advertising in social networking sites. Moreover, it seeks to define this unique environment from other kinds of advertising media and develops a set of implications for marketers.

Methodology

To further understand the characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium, an exploratory qualitative study was undertaken. A sample group of teenagers aged from 13 years to 17 years participated in focus groups discussions and in-depth interviews. As 70% of teenage girls and 50% of teenage boys in Australia have a Myspace or Facebook account (Rutherford and Bittman, 2007), this age group was considered appropriate to study as they are heavy users of online social networking sites.

Four focus groups of six participants each were conducted using a non-probability sampling strategy. The focus groups, which lasted one hour, consisted of semi-structured questions designed to gain the participants' views of online social networking sites and advertising

(Polonsky and Waller, 2005; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). The audio tapes were transcribed and analysed by identifying major themes and subthemes (Garrison *et al.*, 1999; Saunders *et al.*, 2003).

The second form of qualitative research used in the study was a series of eight in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the issues identified in the focus groups (Cooper and Schindler, 2006; Hair *et al.*, 2003; Davis, 1997). Once again, open-ended semi-structured questions were developed to encourage the flow of information (Mason, 2000). The interview participants had all used Facebook and had used an online networking site for over one year. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis. The multi-method research design of this study provides qualitative data from different sources, which adds rigor to the research (Sekaran, 2000).

Findings

A number of themes were identified as a result of the focus groups and in-depth interviews. They are outlined below.

Theme 1. Online Social Networking Sites are a Social Exchange: Internet Advertising is about Providing Information

The results suggest that advertisers cannot approach advertising in online social networking environments in the same manner as they approach advertising on the internet. The internet is generally viewed by consumers as a supplier of information. It is perceived as being vast and global. Consumers understand that there are internet sites that are trustworthy and have developed strategies to determine which sites are not as reliable. They go to the internet for information only when they require it.

Theme 2. Online Social Networking Sites are Private Spaces: Advertising is an Intrusion

While the internet is a source of vast global information, online social networking sites are viewed as very private and personal spaces. Users go to online social networking sites to socialise, to feel good and to build their own image. Their online social networking sites have become their personal brand and, to that end, users can become protective of any intrusion into this private space.

Theme 3. Online Social Networking has Rituals and Shared Meanings: Advertising has to Abide by the Code

Within this private space, there exists a community of users that is governed by unwritten rules and norms that users inherently understand. This system of shared meanings, rituals and norms has little tolerance for those who do not understand and/or engage in them. If advertising is to exist in such an environment, it must respect the way the community operates.

Theme 4. Online Social Networking Sites are Full of Personal Branding and Adolescent Exaggeration: Advertising is Sometimes Just Deceitful

Online social network users expect their friends to exaggerate a little. This is especially true in a space where behaviour is more dis-inhibited than in face-to-face contact and where teenagers are concentrating on projecting the “right” image and enhancing their personal brand. Online social network users are sceptical of messages in general but are particularly sceptical about advertising in their personal spaces. They do not like to be deceived and will resent organisations that try to “trick” them. Further, bad experience does not have to be personal: word-of-mouth feedback from friends, family or even teachers will confirm their negative suspicions towards advertising within this medium.

Theme 5. Online Social Networking Sites are for Friends: Advertising is a “Try Hard”

The mistrust of advertising in personal spaces is amplified when teenagers suspect that commercial online social networking sites are trying to befriend them. They believe that organisations are “trying too hard” to enter consumers’ private social worlds. Advertisers lose credibility when they try to sound like an individual who wants to be the user’s friend when it is obvious to the user that it is in fact a computer-generated message not aimed directly at them. Online social network users would prefer to go directly to a product’s official website, which they believe is more credible than a product’s Myspace site. They believe that commercial Myspace sites are useful only if they relate to their personal interests. However, users would not trust the information on these sites if they needed to make a commercial decision.

The characteristics of online social networking sites, how their advertising differs from standard internet advertising, and the implications are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: How Advertising is Different in Online Social Network Sites

Characteristic of Online Social Networking Sites	Difference from Standard Internet Advertising	Implications for Marketers
Social exchange	This is not a one-way information delivery system. It is a two-way dialogue where both parties need to contribute something valuable.	This is not internet advertising. It is primarily a social environment and users are not generally interested in (or receptive to) commercial messages unless they relate to their interests and beliefs.
Private space	This is not a mass medium. It is a place where friends gather.	Like any social gathering or party, you need to be invited. Advertising within this medium needs to be sensitive to its personal nature. Advertisements should only be posted if they are relevant to the user.
Rituals and shared meanings	This is not a target market demographic. It is a community of friends that have developed ways of speaking, with signals and meanings unique to the group.	Social network sites are not all the same and thus communication must be targeted to the community of users.

Personal branding and adolescent exaggeration	This is not a place for advertising to make outrageous claims. They might forgive exaggeration and even expect their friends to try to enhance their image with flattering claims, but they will not forgive advertisers for lying.	Online social networking sites' users are generally distrustful of the validity of advertising messages on these sites. They would rather access the official website than a company's online social networking profile as they feel this information is more credible.
Perception of risk	This is not a place to take risks. By clicking on a risky advertising link, they could catch a computer virus, be spammed by unwanted follow-up emails, or receive incorrect information.	It should be remembered that the potential consequences of interacting with advertising often poses a risk in the minds of users. Any guarantees that can be given may lessen this risk.
Place for friends	This is not the place to be a "try hard" or try to be something that advertising is not.	Advertising is not a friend to this group. They are sceptical of its messages and often feel resentful and confused by its intrusion. Marketers need to respect the privacy and the social nature of the exchange. While they cannot be "one of them", they may be able to add value to the group.

Conclusion

This paper has identified teenage attitudes towards advertising in online social networks, finding that online social networking sites are private social spaces for friends where advertising is not welcomed. We have sought to distinguish this application of advertising from traditional advertising, and even advertising on the internet. In doing so, we have developed a list of recommendations for marketers. In summary, (1) commercial messages should relate to the target market's interests and beliefs; (2) advertising within this medium needs to be sensitive to the personal nature of the medium; (3) users would rather access the official website than a company's online social networking profile, as they feel the information is more credible; (4) guarantees should be provided to reduce perceived risk of potential consequences of interacting; and (5) while marketers cannot be "one of them", they may be able to add value to the group. Further research needs to explore and define the nature of this unique advertising medium and to track changes in its evolution. By understanding the medium more clearly, advertisers can try to add value to it rather than just being a "try hard".

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